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ABSTRACT

The cultural position of women vis-a-vis work is changing. Family breakdown and the financial burdens which come with single-parenting are forcing women to enter the job market for the first time or in a new way. Even in two-parent families, economic constraints are demanding that wives as well as husbands work full-time. Too many women will experience discouragement as they enter work or change their expectations of it. This is true particularly for women who: (1) are from low-income backgrounds; (2) are entering work after or as a result of personal trauma (divorce, widowhood); (3) are entering work without the credentials of higher education; and/or (4) have life experiences which are traditionally female. For such women gratifying work is not easily found. Moreover, the human services upon which these women rely for new access to work have not provided advocacy for social change, but have often limited the search for new careers by the denial of critical support systems. The New Careers in Mental Health program described in this document was established in 1973 to address these concerns. It involves developing innovative Associate and Bachelor level education programs which enable the combination of full employment in human service and full-time participation in higher education. (Author)

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New Careers in Mental Health:

Educational Supports for Women Paraprofessionals

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The cultural position of women vis-a-vis work is changing. Family breakdown and the financial burdens which come with single-parenting are forcing women to enter the job market for the first time or in a new way. Economic constraints, even to two-parent families are demanding that wives as well as husbands work full time. Too many women will experience discouragement as they enter work or change their expectations of it. This is true particularly for women who: (1) are from low-income backgrounds, (b) are entering work after or as a result of personal trauma (divorce, widowhood), (c) who do so without the credentials of higher education, and/or (d) whose life experiences are traditionally female. For such women gratifying work is not easily found. Moreover, the human services upon which these women rely for new access to work have not provided advocacy for social change, but have often limited the search for new careers by the denial of critical support systems (e.g., daycare, opportunities for career entry without credentials). While some women have been hired because of their ability to perform traditional female roles (e.g., nurturance, helping, and listening), few find in these roles the means to construct economically and psychologically rewarding careers.

These characteristics are true of women and of non-credentialled paraprofessionals generally. The New Careers in Mental Health program was established in 1973 to address these concerns by developing innovative Associate and Bachelor level education programs which enable the combination of full employment in human service and full time participation in higher education. This was accomplished by the creation of supports in both agency and school. Below is a

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description of some of the supports developed by the program.

New Careers in Mental Health (NCMH) has developed at both the community college and university educational programs which provide needed access, relevant curriculum, and increased opportunity for contractual study and field-based learning. Policy reforms secured in participating agencies (e.g., improved career ladders and education release-time guarantees) ensure participation and make possible career benefits, while the education provided encourages agency and New Careerist experimentation with new service roles.

Access. Access to higher education is first of all enhanced by the existence of a visible educational resource center such as the NCMH program has become. Here New Careerists can get academic advising tailored to their work situation and career direction; help in charting feasible degree programs; information about specific courses, instructors and course-challenge opportunities; plus knowledge of social, recreation, and educational resources available on campus. Whereas non-working students may have the time and energy to cull out these supports, New Careerists do not and cannot. Their academic progress can be stymied unless appropriate support services exist.

New Careers has also improved access by helping to restructure academic delivery at both the community college and university. The New Careers Academic Delivery System (see Figure 1, page 3) incorporates site-delivered core seminars and credits for field-based learning with other site-delivered and on-campus course options. The model enables New Careerists to combine full-time work with full-time education and make normal progress towards desired degrees (see Figure 2, page 4).

Paraprofessional access to higher education is only partially accomplished through reform of university and community college programs and traditions. Involvement in degree-oriented programs must also be supported by agency policy and attitude. Needed are release-time policies which permit enrollment without

A. WORK-BASED EDUCATION e.g., Supervised Field, Independent Study, In-Service Training	B. SITE-DELIVERED CORE SEMINARS, e.g., New Careers Philosophy, Intro to Community Mental Health, Program Development and Evaluation
C. SITE-DELIVERED COURSEWORK (other than core), e.g., English Comp, Biological Sciences, Sociology, etc.	D. CAMPUS-BASED COURSEWORK, e.g., Economics, Special Education, Art

With respect to this design, the following highlights should be noted:

1. The credits and curriculum associated with cell A stem entirely from on-the-job performance and work-based learning experiences. They involve virtually no use of release time.

2. The credits and curriculum associated with cells B and C involve minimal use of release time and provide maximized educational accessibility.

3. The credits and curriculum associated with cell D involve use of release-time for travel to and from, as well as participation in, campus-based education.

Figure 1. The New Careers in Mental Health "Academic Delivery System"

AIDE	NEW CAREERIST	TRADITIONAL COLLEGE STUDENT
Works full time	Works full time	Works part time, if at all
Uses release time for in-service	Uses release time for education on campus	Spends most of time on campus or nearby
Enrolls in accredited education as the opportunity arises, if at all	Enrolls in NC-designed education program 4 terms per year (Fall, Winter, Spring and Summer)	Enrolls in traditional education program on campus 3 terms per year (Fall, Winter and Spring)
May enroll each term in a probable maximum of 3-6 credit hours, generally of Cell C or D type*	Is able to enroll each term in 10-13 credit hours: 4-Cell A, 3-Cell B, 3-Cell C, and 3-6-Cell D Experiences*	Enrolls in an average of 15 credit hours each term all (or by far the majority) of Cell D type*
Is able to complete 12-15 credits of questionable degree applicability per year	Is able to complete 40-52 credit hours per year at the above rate	Typically completes 45 credit hours per academic year at the above rate
Probably can't get a degree, or, will take 10+ yrs doing so at the above rate	Is able to complete a 4-yr degree in 3½-4 yrs at this rate (186 hours are typically required)	Is able to complete a 4-yr degree program in 4 yrs at this rate
Is educated in 2 settings (work & campus) yet is unable to gain academic or career mobility from such experience.	Is educated in 2 settings (work & campus) and is able to apply both sets of experience to degree advancement & career mobility	Is educated in 1 setting (campus) and is able to utilize credential to obtain professional-level employment

* see Figure 1.

Figure 2. New Careers as an Alternative Route to a Credential

loss of pay and active encouragement by professionals who value such options. To encourage the creation of such policies, NCMH requires that agencies, rather than individuals, apply for New Careers participation. Application forms ask that agencies articulate policies which support paraprofessional involvement and provide career ladder incentives to participation. When no such policies exist, New Careers faculty collaborate with agency administrators in their design. To date, all New Careers agencies have created release-time policies; 20 of them have continued and/or expanded these to include professional and clerical staff as well.

With the development of release-time policies, New Careers agencies have begun to identify accredited New Careers coursework as a legitimate vehicle for in-service training. Agency training monies have been made available for tuition, and some New Careerists have secured career advancements largely because of academic achievements realized in New Careers.

Curriculum: Stress on community problem solving. Paraprofessional development programs which fail to address the political and psychological circumstances of paraprofessionals can unwittingly encourage complacency and foster uncritical acceptance of traditional service values. Lacking credentials, stature, and economic parity, paraprofessionals are often in positions of limited power and legitimacy. Their self-esteem can be severely undermined, and the pressure to mold career aspirations around established agency patterns can be extreme.

To counter such possibilities, the NCMH curriculum emphasizes social and political awareness and encourages community activism. The goal is to foster a strong sense of accountability for quality service, and to encourage leadership and risk-taking skills necessary to public advocacy. At the community college, New Careers education centers around six core courses which analyze social and political issues influencing the context, design, and direction of public service (see Table 1). Theory-practice integration seminars at the School of Community

Table 1

Six Core Seminars
For New Careers in Mental Health Education
At the Community College

I. New Careers in Mental Health and Human Service. This class will involve interdisciplinary analysis of the social trends generating New Careers philosophy, legislation, and programming. The course will examine the history and growth of the paraprofessional movement in mental health and human service. Lectures, discussions, and readings will encourage political and economic as well as psychological views of service delivery and manpower trends.

II. Community Mental Health Perspectives. The course will focus on the theory and development of the community mental health movement. Definitions of mental health and mental illness will be considered in the social community context. Theoretical orientations and intervention strategies of the various mental health and human service professional groups will be examined.

III. Political and Economic Foundations of Mental Health and Human Service. This course will explore the political context that shapes human services. Economic power and political process at macro and micro levels will be examined vis-a-vis their influence on service delivery. Attention will be given to organizational design, policy-making procedures, and strategies for effective action in local settings.

IV. Cultural Competence for Community Service. This course will focus on cultural pluralism and diversity as a positive attribute of our society. First, differences in race, ethnic/cultural heritage, sex, and age will be examined in terms of myths which encourage the stereotyping of individuals and which thus shape inadequate service systems. Second, alternative competence-oriented views of human diversity will be cultivated for translation into improved services.

V. Community Development. This course will examine current mental health and human service needs, and explore the potential of community development strategies for impacting those needs. Problem definition, resource identification, citizen involvement, and community research will be stressed as tools for effective community development.

VI. Program Development and Evaluation in Community Service. This course will call for the development of specific program development skills and require the design of local service or community interventions. Focus will be on skills and leadership in community problem solving.

Service and Public Affairs (CSPA) allow upper division New Careerists to deepen their study of these same issues. In both settings, the issues raised are examined in light of New Careerists' work experiences.

Whether at the community college or at CSPA, the New Careers seminar functions as a setting for community problem solving. Individually or in groups, New Careerists conduct projects using social analysis and action skills to address local problems. For example, in the seminar entitled, "Political and Economic Foundations of Community Service," focus is on political processes which shape community needs and which control public service funding and programming patterns. Discussions, guest lectures, and simulated games of power politics introduce the importance of competencies such as client advocacy, planning, and coalition building. New Careerists demonstrate their acquisition of these competencies in individualistic ways in term projects. One analyzes local implications of federal legislation vis-a-vis services to the trainable mentally retarded. Another develops a proposal for restructuring a community education service, identifying the political issues which the proposal faces en route through various segments of county bureaucracy. Feedback and dialogue about these projects helps New Caeerists use class effort for impact. In these instances, the first New Careerist presented her work to a local service planning board. The second secured agency endorsement of her plan to expand service.

Contractual study and field-based learning. Direct translation of education into action, as well as support for experimentation with new paraprofessional roles, has been accomplished through the program's expansion of contractual study and field-based learning opportunities. Both are educational innovations essential to university support of paraprofessional development.

First, contractual study. The learning contract is a process of educational planning which demands accountability from, and negotiation by, both students and faculty. Students--i.e., New Careerists--assert learning goals, propose educa-

tional activities, identify learning resources, and suggest criteria for evaluation. Faculty facilitate this process, negotiate content and ensure that academic standards are met. The use of learning contracts enhances university responsiveness to individual learning needs, ensures credibility, sanctions education which occurs in community settings, and markedly expands the academic options of work-based adults. In NCMH, learning contracts have been developed for short-term reading and conference or special projects and, for a few New Careerists, have outlined entire degree programs.

Second, field-based learning. The learning contract process is also used to design field-based learning in NCMH. Here agency experimentation with new paraprofessional roles and new professional/paraprofessional relationships is encouraged. The agency is designated a learning environment. Agency supervisor, New Careers faculty, and New Careerist negotiate a contract in which an identified community mental health role (valued by the program and relevant to community need and agency service possibilities) is introduced. New Careers fauculty ensure that a theoretical framework guides role exploration and accredit agreed-upon learning projects.

By completing these projects under both agency and university supervision, the New Careerist not only acquires new competencies but also studies the relevance of these competences to specific community needs and particular work activities. By offering academic credit and technical assistance, the program provides agencies with incentive for innovation and creates a context for experimentation. The agency supervisor takes on an advocate and support role vis-a-vis the New Careerist, becoming a key participant in the design of new service roles. The New Careerist is moved into a negotiating role with both faculty and agency professionals. Faculty roles are reshaped towards greater community involvement. The process ensures consideration of community need in designing accredited learning and/or specified work activities. Faculty become resources to activities valued by the community while the agency is defined as a valid learning environ-

ment. Overall, the process affirms the maturity and contribution of the paraprofessional by identifying the New Careerist as an active participant in both educational planning and service design.

By action in advocacy for these and other reforms, the program seems to have helped women in New Careers experience regard for traditionally female experiences and yet encourage them to construct genuinely professional and greatly expanded career horizons.